

Baptism

What Is the Mode?

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The religious world confuses every aspect of the clear teachings of the Scriptures on baptism. One of those aspects is the mode. The word “mode” refers to the method by which baptism is performed. A person who surveys the religious landscape will find that Christendom practices three modes of baptism: (1) sprinkling, (2) pouring, (3) and/or immersion. While there are many who claim the proper mode may be sprinkling or pouring, it is not by majority vote that decides, but only permitting the Bible to be our guide of authority (Acts 17:11, John 12:48, Exodus 23:2; Colossians 3:17). The question is then, “Is there any word from the Lord” on the subject of the baptismal mode (Jeremiah 37:17)? Yes!

There are three pieces of evidence that demonstrate that baptism was the mode of immersion only: (1) the lexical definition, (2) the usage of the lexical word in the Scriptures, and (3) church history.

1. Lexical Definition

Though the modern-day English dic-

tionary word “baptism” gives the meaning, “pouring, sprinkling, or immersion,” such is not the case when a person honestly examines the New Testament. A person needs to discover what the word meant during the period when the Greek New Testament was written.

One additional note to make before investigating the lexical evidence is that the word “baptism” is a transliteration of a Greek word. The word “transliterate” means: “to change (letters, words, etc.) into corresponding characters of another alphabet or language” (www.dictionary.com). You can see this clearly when the Greek words are placed beside the English transliteration:

**Greek word; Transliteration; Meaning;
Times Found In The New Testament:**

baptizw = baptizo: “to dip, immerse”; 77 times (Mounce, paragraph 2760)

baptisma = baptisma: “immersion, baptism, ordinance of baptism”; 19 times (Mounce, paragraph 2762)

baptismo/β = baptismos: “an act of dipping or immersion; a baptism; 4 times (Mounce, paragraph 2766)

baptisth/β = baptistes: “one who baptizes, a

baptist”; 12 times (Mounce, paragraph 2769)

baptw = bapto; “to dip, John 13:26; Luke 16:24; to dye, Revelation 19:13*”; 4 times (Mounce, paragraph 2771)

Here is a list of various scholarly works showing what the word means:

(1) **Bullinger** (A Critical Lexicon and Concordance to the English and Greek New Testament, 90). **baptizw**: “**To make a thing dipped or dyed. To immerse for a religious purpose.**”

(2) **Danker, et al** (A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature, 164). **baptizw**: “**Dip, immerse, mid. Dip oneself, wash (in non-Christian lit. also ‘plunge, sink, drench, overwhelm. . .’).**”

(3) **Thayer** (A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament, 94). **baptizw**: “**immersion, submersion.**”

(4) **Abbott-Smith** (A Manual Greek Lexicon of the New Testament, 74). **baptizw**: “**to dip, immerse, sink.**”

(5) **Perschbacher** (The New Analytical Greek Lexicon, 66). **baptizw**: “**to dip, immerse; to cleanse or purify by washing.**”

(6) **Richards** (Expository Dictionary of Bible Words, 100-101). **baptizw**: “**Bapto is the basic verb. It means ‘to dip in’ or ‘to dip under.’ It is often used of dipping fabric in a dye. Baptizo is an intensive form of bapto. From early times it was used in the sense of immersing.**”

(7) **McReynolds** (Word Study Greek-English New Testament, 907). **baptizw**: “**Baptizo, immerse.**”

(8) **Vine** (An Expository Dictionary of New Testament Words, 1:96-97): “**BAPTISMA, baptism, consisting of the processes of immersion, submersion and emergence (from bapto, to dip). BAPTIZO, to baptize, primarily a frequentative form of bapto, to dip, was used among the Greeks to signify the dyeing of a garment, or the drawing of water by dipping a vessel into another, etc.**”

All of the lexical evidence weighs in to show that the original meaning of baptism in the first century was to immerse, dip, engulf, and submerge. Nowhere will a person find any evidence from the original language to show that baptizw means to sprinkle or pour. The Greek language had a word for sprinkle, which was *rantizō*

(rhantidzo). This word is used several times in the New Testament to convey the idea of sprinkling, but never is it associated with baptism (Heb. 9:13,19, 10:22). Baptism (immersion) is associated with “washing” (Hebrews 10:22; Ephesians 5:25-26; 1 Corinthians 6:11; Titus 3:5) since it is through water immersion that we contact the blood of Jesus that washes away our sins (Acts 22:16). However, sprinkling is connected with the blood of Jesus because it represents the ultimate fulfillment of what the Old Testament animal sacrifices were pointing to when the blood was sprinkled on the altar (Hebrews 10:1–4, 22; 12:22–24; 1 Peter 1:2). If the Greeks had a word for sprinkling, and the New Testament writers chose to use the distinguished word for immersion, how can anyone say there is biblical authority for sprinkling as the proper mode of baptism? The fact is, a person must go beyond the authority of the New Testament to hold to sprinkling/pouring as baptism.

2. The Usage of the Lexical Word in the Scriptures

The first use of the word is John 3:23 regarding the administration of John the prophet. In this passage the Bible records that “...*John also was baptizing in Aenon near Salim, because there was*

much water there...” (John 3:23). This is a powerful incidental detail that John the apostle just so happens to write down by the inspiration of the Spirit. It is a fact that “much water” is not needed for sprinkling or pouring. When reading this passage one must honestly ask himself, “Why did John need to be baptizing where there was much water?” The best evidence suggests that he was baptizing where there was “much water” because he needed enough water to administer immersion.

The second passage is Mark 1:9-10 regarding Jesus being baptized by John the prophet. Mark records, “*And immediately coming up from the water, He saw the heavens parting and the Spirit descending upon Him like a dove*” (Mark 1:10). Mark records that Jesus came up from the water. Question: “What do you first have to do in order *to come up out of the water?*” You must first *go down into the water!* It is clear from this passage that Jesus was immersed, which plainly teaches us that one must be engulfed in water and then come up out of it to be baptized like Jesus. There is no way anyone can say this is anything else but the act of immersion.

The third passage is Acts 8:38, regarding the Ethiopian eunuch’s conversion. Luke records, “*And he commanded the chariot to stand still. And*

both Philip and the eunuch went down into the water, and he baptized him” (Acts 8:38). The mode of baptism required both Philip (the administrator) and the eunuch to go down into the water. Why was this necessary? If sprinkling or pouring were used in this case, either Phillip or the eunuch could have gone and gotten the water for the purpose of pouring or sprinkling. However, if baptism was immersion, it would have been necessary for both Philip and the eunuch to go down into the water.

The fourth passage is Romans 6:1-4 (see also Colossians 2:11-12). In this context, baptism is likened to a burial. Everyone understands that in a burial the body is completely covered. Remember, Jesus was laid in a new tomb owned by Joseph of Arimathea, and the tomb was sealed by a large stone (Matthew 27:57-61). The body of Jesus was covered on all sides. Likewise the linking of baptism with the idea of a burial clearly shows that Paul, the inspired voice of God, recognized that baptism was by immersion. Sprinkling or pouring are not immersion because they do not fit the picture of being identified with Christ’s death, burial, and resurrection. Unless a sinner has been buried with Christ in the waters of baptism, he cannot claim to have been buried with Jesus or to be raised in newness of life (Romans 6:2-4).

The fifth passage is the usage of the word “baptism” in a figurative sense in Matthew 20:20–28. The sons of Zebedee clearly had a mistaken view about the nature of the kingdom of Jesus. Jesus reveals to them that if they are to be partakers of the blessings of the kingdom, then they will have to undergo suffering, just as He suffered. This is why He stated in Matthew 20:22-23: *“You do not know what you ask. Are you able to drink the cup that I am about to drink, and be baptized with the baptism that I am baptized with?”* They said to Him, *“We are able.”* So He said to them, *“You will indeed drink My cup, and be baptized with the baptism that I am baptized with; but to sit on My right hand and on My left is not Mine to give, but it is for those for whom it is prepared by My Father.”* We know that Jesus was not referencing His water baptism by John the prophet (Matthew 3:13–17) because the death of John had occurred six chapters earlier in Matthew 14:1–12. You cannot be baptized by a dead administrator! Secondly, Jesus had already made a reference to His death using this same type of language in Luke 12:50: *“But I have a baptism to be baptized with, and how distressed I am till it is accomplished!”* Who would dare promote the ridiculous idea that Jesus only suffered a little? Since

He used the imagery of baptism in regard to His suffering, it is obvious that He was engulfed (or overwhelmed) in pain when He hung on the cross!

The sixth passage is the usage of the phrase “*baptized into Moses*” in a figurative sense in 1 Corinthians 10:1–4. If you read the historical account of the Israelites passing through the Red Sea (Exodus 14:21–31), you will discover that they were covered by walls of water on each side and the cloud of glory overshadowed them (cf. Exodus 14:18). They were covered on all sides! Who would ever suggest the ridiculous idea that when the sea divided, the Israelites passed through water that was no more than a few millimeters high?

The seventh passage is the usage of the word “baptism” as an antitype of the universal flood of Noah’s day in 1 Peter 3:21. Read the historical account of Noah and his family who were saved by the overwhelming water that covered all the pre-Flood mountains (Genesis 8:17–20), lasted a little over a year, and killed all the animals and human beings that were outside the ark that could not survive in water (Genesis 8:21–23). With that description of the flood, the farthest idea from your mind would be to suggest that the mountains were covered with a few millimeters of water or that animals/

human beings drowned in a sprinkling of water!

3. Church History

Although church history in and of itself is not the authority, it can help us to understand what the church did directly after the death of the apostles (who were guided into all truth by the Holy Spirit and preserved the message in the writings of the New Testament – John 16:13; 1 Corinthians 14:37; Jude 3), and it can help us understand how sprinkling/pouring came about as a step of apostasy of departing from the original scriptural mode of immersion.

During the first three centuries after the establishment of the church, it is clear that Christians recognized that immersion was the proper mode of baptism.

John D. Castelein states: “Finally, we can trace the emergence in church history of sprinkling as a secondary mode of baptizing that eventually replaced immersion in Roman Catholic practice. The Didache, a second-century Christian document, allows for pouring — but not sprinkling — of water but only when immersion (preferably in cold flowing water) is just not possible. For example, a man named Novatian (ca. AD 251) received an emergency baptism by having water poured all over him while he lay in bed, since it

was feared he would soon die. Such an emergency baptism is called a “clinical” baptism (from the Greek word for “bed”). When Novatian was later elevated to the priesthood, there was much protest due to his unorthodox and incomplete baptism.

By the middle of the third century, the church father Cyprian was still reluctant to declare that sprinkling was as valid a mode as immersion. Even by AD 753, Pope Stephen II, while in France, was being asked by monks from Cressy in Brittany whether it was valid to sprinkle an infant on the head. There are later councils (e.g., Calcuith, AD 816) that insist that even infants must be immersed. For a long time in church history, people who experienced only this provisional “clinical” baptism could not partake of the Lord’s Supper until they were fully immersed. In fact, it is universally acknowledged that sprinkling and pouring did not become officially recognized as alternative modes to immersion until the Council of Ravenna in 1311.” (Nettles et al., **Understanding Four Views on Baptism**, 140-141).

Church history teaches us two clear lessons. Early Christians considered baptism to be full body immersion, and departure from this teaching was a direct result of man’s reasoning. If we desire to be

New Testament Christians, we must abandon the thinking of men and return to the ancient order of the apostles and prophets, inspired by the Holy Spirit.

Is the mode of baptism really that important? Should we sprinkle today if people request it? When all the evidence has been weighed, it is clear that the Scriptures teach baptism is by immersion. The Greek language overwhelmingly affirms that its original meaning was immersion and early Christians practiced immersion until the thinking of man unfortunately intervened. In order to be pleasing unto God, we must practice only the true mode of baptism - **immersion**.

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